

Emergent Innovation: sustainable innovation as learning from the future as it emerges

Most approaches in innovation are extrapolating past experiences into the future or they use "wild" out-of-the-box-thinking methods for generating new knowledge or perspectives. However, how can we create something radically new and at the same time something that has been "waited for", although nobody has explicitly known or seen it; i.e., something that—despite its perhaps radical newness—appears just in the right time at the right place ("kairos") and organically fits in the existing environment (be it a market, an organization, a culture, or society). The challenge is to create something that is both radically new and fits into existing patterns of perception and thought. It is a kind of "innovation from within", an innovation that respects what is already there and makes use of its potentials for creating something new in a sustainable and thriving manner. This presentation introduces an alternative approach to innovation and presents both its theoretical foundation and a concrete well-proven innovation process: Emergent Innovation.

Besides other concepts from the fields of innovation, cognitive science, and epistemology, this approach is based on C.O.Scharmer's Theory U. It will be shown that a new kind of "cognition and epistemology of potentiality" is necessary in order to accomplish such processes as "learning from the future" and "listening to the future as it emerges". It involves a whole new set of cognitive abilities, attitudes and epistemological virtues, such as radical openness, deep observation and understanding skills, reframing, etc. The second part of this chapter presents the Emergent Innovation approach that applies these theoretical concepts in a concrete process design. It is a socio-epistemological innovation technology bringing forth profoundly new knowledge and innovations having the qualities explicated above. The practical concepts, the implications as well as the learnings from and for Theory U will be discussed.